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German Prison Camp
In Dade City, Florida

Charles W. Arnade, Ph.D.

Dade City, the county seat of rural Pasco County, was not atypical of small Florida towns during World War II. Its proximity to Tampa, a little over thirty miles away, might have made Dade City somewhat more aware of the war. Tampa, with its excellent harbor and its new military bases, had become one of Florida’s important locations in the war effort.

Dade City had a population of 2,561 people in the 1940 U.S. census, and 2,689 inhabitants in the 1945 Florida census. There were two railroad stations, one for the Atlantic Coast Line and the other for the Seaboard Air Line Railroad. There also was a Greyhound bus station. All three stations were important to the city and relatively busy. But already many people traveled to Tampa by car on well maintained roads. Naturally the war’s gas rationing had limited these travels and the railroad and bus were good alternatives. Not many people went to the western part of the county that faces the Gulf of Mexico. That was still a mostly dormant region whereas today it is the most populous part. For example, New Port Richey then had just 923 inhabitants according to the 1945 census, adjacent Port Richey had 219. In the 1940 national census, Pasco County had 13,980 people, but the state census five year later gave the county a population of only 13,729.

The main economy in and around Dade City was citrus, cattle, and lumber. There was a large lumber mill in nearby Lacoochee, and in Dade City, a dynamic citrus packing plant called Pasco Packing (which later became part of the Lylkes conglomerate). Dade City was a town of thoroughly Southern rural and political values. Strict racial segregation between “coloreds” and whites was strictly enforced.

Whites were predominately of northern European stock. The first, and for long time only, Jewish family were refugees from Germany. The “coloreds” lived mainly across the railroad tracks. There were (as there still are) a considerable number of poor whites, a small but dynamic middle class of Anglo-Saxon roots and values, and a few wealthy families. The latter had achieved their privileged status by acquiring large tracts of land cheaply and converting them to citrus, cattle and lumber. Political power was within the framework of the all encompassing Democratic Party which locally was dominated by a few from the wealthy, mainly land-owning, families.

A noticeable landmark, about six miles west from Dade City, was the Benedictine St. Leo Abbey founded in 1889 (the only Catholic abbey in Florida). The abbey community was in the incorporated city of St. Leo. The town of San Antonio was founded as a Catholic colony in 1881, and by the beginning of World War II, had around 500 inhabitants. Both San Antonio and St. Leo, from their beginnings, had a large German ethnic presence. In its earliest days San Antonio had an excellent weekly German newspaper, the Florida Staats-Zeitung (a complete set is in the St. Leo Abbey archives, and a microfilm copy is in the USF Library’s Special Collections). During World War II, their roots did not deter those of German origin from rallying around the American flag, as had been the case during World War I when there was considerable sympathy for Germany. Some nostalgia and adherence to German values and culture always continued. The German people, in contrast to the Japanese, were admired. It was Hitler and his accomplices who were detested.

If Dade City was somewhat removed from the war, except for those families who had sons and daughters in the armed forces,
the unexpected establishment of a branch German prison camp on the very outskirts of the town in 1944, with a prisoner population of around 350, brought the war close to home. It certainly was one of the most important events during the war for small, rural Dade City. The camp was located about one mile from downtown, very close to the geographic divide of the “white” and “colored” areas. Somehow this divide still exists today, but to a lesser extent. It is now mostly between poor and affluent. Many of the poor are still blacks, and now include Hispanics, who are more recent arrivals.

In the last three decades Pasco County has had a phenomenal growth, with a 2001 population of 362,658. In the 2000 census, Dade City had 6,100 inhabitants, and the city claimed in January 2003 to have 6,400. It must be stated that the incorporated area of the city is much larger than it was during World War II. The western part of the county, which was sparsely developed at the time of the war, has now become the most populous area. In 2000, New Port Richey had 16,117 inhabitants and nearby Port Richey had 3,021. This means that the Richey urban area now has more inhabitants than the whole county had during World War II.

In 1976, the Pasco County Commission established the Pasco County Historical Preservation Board. This board of members, appointed by the county commission, has diligently designated historical sites and structures, and placed historical markers at selected sites. Two charter members of the board (the author was one) realized that a great number of the 1980s inhabitants of Dade City were unaware of the existence of a wartime German prison camp in Dade City. There remained only a few persons who had seen and had contact with the camp and its prisoners during its years of operation. The two of us suggested, over fifteen years ago, that a historical marker should be placed at the site, though none of the wooden structures of the camp remained. It was a slow process to convince the whole board. When this was accomplished, the historical verification had to be undertaken. The board is very careful that accuracy is attained. In October 1995, the marker was dedicated and one ex-prisoner of the camp came from Germany to attend the ceremony.

When it was decided to place a historical
marker at the camp site, much research had to be done. The preservation board had to rely partially on oral history. There were only a few persons still alive in Dade City who had had contact with the camp and its prisoners, and only a small number of surviving prisoners were known. Since oral history is often unreliable, documentary sources were used to give increased accuracy. When I first found out about the camp in the 1960s, I was given contradictory information, including the actual location of the camp. We were lucky to get the cooperation of Ms. Martha Knapp, a retired teacher, who lives close to Dade City. For some years she had quietly undertaken the collection of data and even contacted some of the surviving Dade City POWs in Germany. At our suggestion, Ms. Knapp's files were donated to the USF Library's Special Collection, and are now identified as the “Knapp Collection.” The Special Collections staff professionally arranged the material in two archival boxes, and it is available for public use in the library.

Certainly the Knapp Collection is not all inclusive. For a detailed research article more documentation is required from the U.S. National Archives, and other U.S. government sources, and also from the German military archives. Some statements from the German prisoners are available in the Knapp Collection. A planned reunion several years ago in Dade City of former prisoners did not succeed because of death and old age. The German POW who did return for the placing of the marker in 1995 has recently passed away. The Dade City residents who knew the POWs are also fading from the scene.

It must be stated that the Dade City prison compound was a branch camp administered from the central camp at Camp Blanding, the U.S. National Guard Post established in 1939 in Clay County. Camp Blanding was a huge multipurpose military camp during World War II. The story of the German prison camps in Florida has found a competent historian in Robert D. Billinger, Jr., Ruth Davis Horton Professor of History at Wingate University in North Carolina. About thirty years ago he published his first article in the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, later reproduced as a chapter in the 1993 book by St. Leo College Press dealing with World War II in Florida. In 1994, he published another article in the *FHQ* about the mother German prison at Camp Blanding. In 2000, Billinger published the book *Hitler’s Soldiers in the Florida Boards May Draft Men Over 25 Sun

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**Nazi War Prisoners Arrive in Dade City**

DADE CITY; April 15.—A unit of 250 German prisoners arrived on a special train this week from a camp in Augusta, Ga., and have been moved into the camp on the eastern edge of Dade City. Buildings to house the prisoners and the force of sixty military police have been built under the direction of Army engineers. The military personnel of the camp are permitted to live off the reservation when not on duty and many of them have joined here by their families and have taken apartments in Dade City. The prisoners were brought here to work at the plant of the Pasco Packing Association and the mill at Lake Lacochee, operated by Cumer Sons Cypress Co. Most of the prisoners are young and groups of them in the camp last evening were singing. An officer remarked that they would no doubt soon be singing “God Bless America,” as they seem rather content to be here.

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*Florida Historical Quarterly*, April 15, 1944. (Courtesy of the author.)

Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida 1942-1946 (University Press of Florida, The Florida History and Culture Series, Gainesville). [This 263-page book was reviewed by the author in the summer 2001]
It needs to be said that Billinger does not deal specifically with any of the 21 satellite camps distributed all over Florida that were administered from Camp Blanding (near Starke) and Camp Gordon Johnston (near Carabelle in Florida's Panhandle - smaller than Camp Blanding). The Dade City camp is mentioned only in passing as are most of the other satellite camps.

Florida housed about 10,000 German prisoners, representing less than 4% of the 378,000 German POWs in the U.S. It is interesting that few present Florida residents know that the state had POW camps. I teach at least 150 university students every year, and I cannot recall a single one mentioning the existence of these camps. Professor Billinger's excellent, and very readable book, received little publicity and hardly any reviews in Florida newspapers. Local studies of these local POW camps are in order. Historical markers such as the one in Dade City ought to be placed at locations in the other counties where camps existed.

Let me summarize the history of the German World War II POW camp in Dade City. It existed for only two years and usually housed over 300 prisoners. For example, in September 1945, it had 350 men. The first contingent arrived via the Atlantic Coast Line railroad in the spring of 1944. The prisoners - as in most of the other U.S. POW camps - stayed beyond the end of the war in Europe; the last men left the Dade City camp in January 1946. Most, if not all, of the prisoners came from the North African theater of war, remnants of the German Afrika Korps assault force under the command of the legendary General Rommel.

Dade City inhabitants were first informed of the presence of the German prisoners by the local weekly newspaper, the Dade City Banner, of April 14, 1944. The prisoners were put to work at the Pasco Packing citrus plant, and also at the Cummer Sons Cypress Company in nearby Lacoochee, which operated a large lumber mill. They received regular wages, but kept only a percentage while the balance went for the expenses of the camp. It soon became apparent that many of the prisoners were competent professionals who had been drafted into the elite expeditionary army corps that saw service in North Africa. Therefore, they were often asked by their camp supervisors to perform more skilled tasks. For example, a prisoner by the name of Heinz Fried was a talented artist. He painted a mural on the walls of the executive offices of Pasco Packing that is still there today. He also drew a huge orange on the company's old tower. (So far, no photo of the tower with this orange has come to light; there is hope that even-
Actually one will be found.) Mr. Fried also sketched local citizens' portraits, of which two have survived in personal possession.

As in many German prison camps, there was tension and even some minor violence between a few hard core Nazi prisoners and those who opposed them. A few prisoners held strong anti-Nazi sentiments and some even showed sympathy for the Allies. Evidence exists that the Dade City camp was relatively peaceful and, with very exceptions, the inmates cooperative; those who were not were shipped to other camps. The Dade City camp appears to have been one of the most agreeable and one of the least rigid POW camps in the U.S. Escapes were common in German prison camps in the U.S., but most escapees were caught. In Dade City, where prisoners had easy access to the outside, only four tried to escape. Two escaped in the first year and both were located at the nearby Withlacoochee River, where they had leisurely stopped to rest and fish. In January 1945, two more escaped and managed to reach Jacksonville, quite a distance, where they were recaptured. Their punishment was not too severe.

While, theoretically, fraternization with the locals was forbidden, much interaction took place. We are told of invitations for lunch with local families which were arranged in a roundabout way. Locals were curious and interested in Germany and German culture, partly because many of the original settlers in east Pasco County had been of German origin. Many of the prisoners were allowed to go on Sundays to church services at nearby St. Leo Abbey, which welcomed them. From its beginnings the abbey had many monks of German descent. After the mass, the prisoners were asked to join the monks for lunch. Even during the war, food at the abbey was plentiful and tasteful. The Lutheran prisoners went often to the Sunday services at Zion Lutheran Church in Tampa, where they too were well treated. Some local residents complained that the food served in the prison camp was better than they could afford or could obtain. They said that the prison commissary had items such as candy that they couldn't buy because of rationing. Apparently conditions in the camp deteriorated after Germany's surrender in 1945, as occurred in other prison camps in the U.S. In January 1946, the last prisoner left Dade City. Most of the Dade City prisoners were transported to Great Britain for further detention, and soon after the prisoners were transferred, the camp was closed. It became part of the history of Dade City and Pasco County, but soon was forgotten. Interest in the camp's history was resurrected for two reasons: the return of some former prisoners as tourists for nostalgic reasons, and to locate friends they had made as prisoners, and the establishment of the Pasco County Historical Preservation and Restoration Committee in 1976.

The individual histories of the 21 branch German prison camps in Florida, administered from two central camps, still await local research by interested professional or amateur historians, journalists, or students for their theses or papers. Other than the one in Dade City, there were other camps located throughout central Florida in the towns of DeLand, Leesburg, Orlando, Winter Haven, and at Tampa's Drew Field and MacDill Field. The other camps in north and south Florida ranged from Eglin Field in the Panhandle to Homestead south of Miami. I repeat, the history of these local prison camps is an ideal subject for a college seminar paper or even a master's thesis. It will require patience and a careful search for data. Those who were prisoners and those who have memories of them are now few; soon they will all be gone. The availability to the public of the once restricted records in the Modern Military Branch Records Group in the U.S. National Archives facilitates such research. Unfortunately, as of this writing, there still are some restrictions limiting use of the German Federal Military Archives in Freiburg, Germany. Here in Dade City, we are lucky to have some oral testimonies of surviving German prisoners. Seven of them gathered in late 1997, in Stuttgart, but their planned 1998 reunion in Dade City did not materialize.

While there were, naturally, common elements in all the branch prison camps, each one had its individuality and uniqueness. These unique characteristics and histories should be found through research and presented in studies of the branch camps. Much information should be included such as the types of prisoners, whether they were captured in the same area, represented the same military branch, or if they were more diverse in other ways. Important, also, is their ideological makeup: fanatical supporters of Hitler, or lukewarm, or opposed to the Nazi regime - as were many in the Dade City
camp. The hierarchy of military ranks needs to be addressed. In the Dade City camp, most were officers. The attitude of the American supervisors (guards) is also important; in Dade City it ranged from correct to friendly. It should also be ascertained why a particular Florida locale was selected; Dade City was selected because of the existence of the large citrus packing plant and the large lumber company in closeby Lacoochee. Both needed workers, and these companies had clout with the government. The prison camp was closed when the American workers returned from the war; the prisoners were then shipped to England. Of pivotal importance is the attitude of the local inhabitants. It was positive in Dade City where many took a liking to Germans and German culture. As said, extensive fraternization took place.

In sum, the presence of a considerable number of Germans POWs in Florida is an interesting, but little known chapter in the state's history. What has been done to unearth the history of the Dade City camp needs to be repeated for the other satellite camps and given some publicity beyond the confines of the locality. Often there is only a short report in the local media, soon to be forgotten. Local history is the very basis of history.

ENDNOTE

Dr. Charles W. Arnade is the Distinguished Professor of Government and International Affairs at the University of South Florida, Tampa. He has lived and travelled the countries and continents of the world throughout his life and academic career, and has lectured, conducted research and taught in North America, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, Pacific and Indian Ocean island nations, Japan, South Korea, China (People's Republic and Taiwan), Philippines, South East Asia, India, Israel, Turkey, plus in Arctic Greenland and Spitzbergen. He is the recipient of many grants and fellowships including Fulbrights, Ford Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Doherty (Princeton University), Council of American Learned Societies, American Philosophical Society, and was a White House Fellow to Bolivia during the U.S. Bicentennial. He has taught both undergraduate and graduate courses in History, Government (Political Science), International Studies, and Cultural Anthropology, and was the recipient of USF's Teacher of the Year Award in 1987. He is the author of numerous books, monographs, articles, essays, encyclopedia entries, and over 1,500 book reviews.

Dr. Arnade received his AA degree (equivalent) from Colegio La Salle, Cochabamba, Bolivia, BA and MA from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Ph.D. from the University of Florida. Born in Goerlitz, Germany, Dr. Arnade has been married 54 years to Marjorie J. Arnade, and has eight children, and fourteen grandchildren. Dr. Arnade was a member of the charter faculty at USF, and though now retired after 50 years, continues to teach as one of the longest-serving professors in the Florida state university system.